

The Era of Good Feelings

The Growth of Political Factionalism and Sectionalism

The Era of Good Feelings began with a burst of nationalistic fervor. The economic program adopted by Congress, including a national bank and a protective tariff, reflected the growing feeling of national unity. The Supreme Court promoted the spirit of nationalism by establishing the principle of federal supremacy. Industrialization and improvements in transportation also added to the sense of national unity by contributing to the nation's economic strength and independence and by linking the West and the East together.

But this same period also witnessed the emergence of growing factional divisions in politics, including a deepening sectional split between the North and South. A severe economic depression between 1819 and 1822 provoked bitter division over questions of banking and tariffs. Geographic expansion exposed latent tensions over the morality of slavery and the balance of economic power. It was during the Era of Good Feelings that the political issues arose that would dominate American politics for the next 40 years.

The Panic of 1819

In 1819 a financial panic swept across the country. The growth in trade that followed the War of 1812 came to an abrupt halt. Unemployment mounted, banks failed, mortgages were foreclosed, and agricultural prices fell by half. Investment in western lands collapsed.

The panic was frightening in its scope and impact. In New York State, property values fell from \$315 million in 1818 to \$256 million in 1820. In Richmond, property values fell by half. In Pennsylvania, land values plunged from \$150 an acre in 1815 to \$35 in 1819. In Philadelphia, 1,808 individuals were committed to debtors' prison. In Boston, the figure was 3,500.

For the first time in American history, the problem of urban poverty commanded public attention. In New York in 1819, the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism counted 8,000 paupers out of a population of 120,000. The next year, the figure climbed to 13,000. Fifty thousand people were unemployed or irregularly employed in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and one foreign observer estimated that half a million people were jobless nationwide. To address the problem of destitution, newspapers appealed for old clothes and shoes for the poor, and churches and municipal governments distributed soup. Baltimore set up 12 soup kitchens in 1820 to give food to the poor.

The downswing spread like a plague across the country. In Cincinnati, bankruptcy sales occurred almost daily. In Lexington, Kentucky, factories worth half a million dollars were idle. Matthew Carey, a Philadelphia economist, estimated that 3 million people, one-third of the nation's population, were adversely affected by the panic. In 1820, John C. Calhoun commented: "There has been within these two years an immense revolution of fortunes in every part of the Union; enormous numbers of persons utterly ruined; multitudes in deep distress."

The panic had several causes, including a dramatic decline in cotton prices, a contraction of credit by the Bank of the United States designed to curb inflation, an 1817 congressional order requiring hard-currency payments for land purchases, and the closing of many factories due to foreign competition.

The panic unleashed a storm of popular protest. Many debtors agitated for "stay laws" to provide relief from debts as well as the abolition of debtors' prisons. Manufacturing interests called for increased protection from foreign imports, but a growing number of southerners believed that high protective tariffs, which raised the cost of imported goods and reduced the flow of international trade, were the root of their troubles. Many people clamored for a reduction in the cost of government and pressed for sharp reductions in federal and state budgets. Others, particularly in the South and West, blamed the panic on the nation's banks and particularly the tight-money policies of the Bank of the United States.

By 1823 the panic was over. But it left a lasting imprint on American politics. The panic led to demands for the democratization of state constitutions, an end to restrictions on voting and office holding, and heightened hostility toward banks and other "privileged" corporations and monopolies. The panic also exacerbated tensions within the Republican Party and aggravated sectional tensions as northerners pressed for higher tariffs while southerners abandoned their support of nationalistic economic programs.

The Missouri Crisis

In the midst of the panic, a crisis over slavery erupted with stunning suddenness. It was, Thomas Jefferson who wrote, like "a firebell in the night." The crisis was ignited by the application of Missouri for statehood, and it involved the status of slavery west of the Mississippi River.

East of the Mississippi, the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River formed a boundary between the North and South. States south of this line were slave states; states north of this line had either abolished slavery or adopted gradual emancipation policies. West of the Mississippi, however, no clear line demarcated the boundary between free and slave territory.

Representative James Tallmadge, a New York Republican, provoked the crisis in February 1819 by introducing an amendment to restrict slavery in Missouri as a condition of statehood. The amendment prohibited the further introduction of slaves into Missouri and provided for emancipation of all children of slaves at the age of 25. Voting along ominously sectional lines, the House approved the Tallmadge Amendment, but the amendment was defeated in the Senate.

Southern and northern politicians alike responded with fury. Southerners condemned the Tallmadge proposal as part of a northeastern plot to dominate the government. They declared the United States to be a union of equals, claiming that Congress had no power to place special restrictions upon a state. John Randolph declared that "God has given us Missouri and the devil shall not take it from us."

Talk of disunion and civil war was rife. Senator Freeman Walker of Georgia envisioned "civil war ... a brother's sword crimsoned with a brother's blood." Northern politicians responded with equal vehemence. Said Representative Tallmadge, "If blood is necessary to extinguish any fire which I have assisted to kindle, I can assure you gentlemen, while I regret the necessity, I shall not forbear to contribute my mite." Northern leaders argued that national policy, enshrined in the Northwest Ordinance, committed the government to halt the expansion of the institution of slavery. They warned that the extension of slavery into the West would inevitably increase the pressures to reopen the African slave trade.

This was not the first congressional crisis over slavery. In 1790, a bitter dispute had arisen over whether Congress should accept antislavery petitions. In 1798, a furor had erupted over a proposal to extend the Northwest Ordinance prohibition on slavery to Mississippi. In 1804, a new uproar had broken out over a proposal to ban new slaves from immigrating to Louisiana. In 1801 and again in 1814-1815, Federalists had protested the three-fifths compromise, but never before had passions been so heated or sectional antagonisms so overt.

In the Northeast, for the first time, philanthropists like Elias Boudinot of Burlington, New Jersey, succeeded in mobilizing public opinion against the westward expansion of slavery. Mass meetings convened in a number of

cities in the Northeast. The vehemence of anti-Missouri feeling is apparent in an editorial that appeared in the *New York Advertiser*: "THIS QUESTION INVOLVES NOT ONLY THE FUTURE CHARACTER OF OUR NATION, BUT THE FUTURE WEIGHT AND INFLUENCE OF THE FREE STATES. IF NOW LOST--IT IS LOST FOREVER."

Compromise ultimately resolved the crisis of 1819. The Senate narrowly voted to admit Missouri as a slave state. To preserve the sectional balance, it also voted to admit Maine, which had previously been a part of Massachusetts, as a free state, and to prohibit the formation of any further slave states from the territory of the Louisiana Purchase north of the 36th 30th north latitude. Henry Clay then skillfully steered the compromise through the House, where a handful of antislavery representatives, fearful of the threat to the Union, threw their support behind the proposals.

A second crisis erupted when the Missouri constitutional convention directed the state legislature to forbid the migration of free blacks and mulattoes into the state. This crisis, too, was resolved by compromise. Missouri agreed not to abridge the constitutional rights of any United States citizens--without specifically acknowledging that free blacks were U.S. citizens.

Compromise was possible in 1819 and 1820 because most northerners were apathetic to the Tallmadge Amendment and opponents of slavery were still disunited. Public attention was focused on the Panic of 1819 and the resulting depression. Leadership of the drive to restrict slavery in Missouri had been assumed by Presbyterian and Congregationalist churchmen, provoking widespread hostility from an anticlerical and anti-Federalist opposition.

Southerners won a victory in 1820, but they paid a high price. While many states would eventually be organized from the Louisiana Purchase area north of the compromise line, only two (Arkansas and part of Oklahoma) would be formed from the southern portion. If the South was to defend its political power against an antislavery majority, it had but two options in the future. It would either have to forge new political alliances with the North and West, or it would have to acquire new territory in the Southwest. The latter would inevitably reignite northern opposition to the further expansion of slavery.

The Era of Good Feelings ended on a note of foreboding. Although compromise had been achieved, it was clear that sectional conflict had not been resolved, only postponed. Sectional antagonism, Jefferson wrote, "is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper." John Quincy Adams agreed. The Missouri crisis, he wrote, is only the "title page to a great tragic volume."

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